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ABSTRACT

A comparison is made between the educational philosophies of Confucius and John Dewey. The comparison is limited to four aspects of education: democracy, instruction, learning, and scientific attitude. Confucianism emphasizes the necessity of self-examination, of the cultivation of virtue, and of education as the means of producing the kind of gentlemen who would be the most qualified governors of their states. Pragmatism, on the other hand, attempts to apply the methods of science to philosophy and lays its foundation on the principle that the meaning and truth of an idea are determined by the idea's effects in practice and on conduct. The paper notes some of the similarities between Confucianism and pragmatism. (JD)

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THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES OF JOHN DEWEY AND CONFUCIUS: A COMPARISON

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The Educational Philosophies of John Dewey and Confucius: A Comparison

Pheny Zhou Smith and Harold A. Smith

John Dewey and Confucius are two of the best-known educators of all time in their own countries. Both, however, were philosophers as well as educators. In fact, their philosophies have not only influenced educational theory and practice, but also psychology, law, and political science.

Confucianism has strongly influenced education, government, and attitudes toward correct personal behavior and the individual's duty to society in many Asian countries. More than merely a philosophy, yet not a religion in the usual sense, it has traditionally been the substance of learning, the source of values, and the social code of many people other than Chinese. In other words, it is a moral system and promotes an inner-worldly morality for all people. The center of the system is humanity, or "ren" in Chinese. "Ren is to love men," Confucius said (Analects of Confucius, Chapter 12, Section 22). "Ren" can be translated as love, human heartedness and virtue. In its fullest sense, 'ren' "signified supreme moral achievement and excellence in character in accord with Li (ritual norms) and the principles of Chung (loyalty to one's true nature, Shu (reciprocity), Yi (righteousness), and Hsiao (filial piety)" (Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 3, p. 530). Based on this ethical principle of Ren, Confucianism concentrates on reaching peacefulness and harmony among people in the world through the discussing and teaching of human relationship and morality (Zhao Yang-Xiong, p. 18); that is, adjustment to the world, to its nature, and to its conventions. Concerned with secular and conservative morality, Confucianism is readily understood by the man in the street, and its ethical teaching, pervasive wisdom and common sense can be applied in everyday life. Furthermore, the chief strength of Confucianism is its adaptability to varying circumstances.

It is this remarkable quality that enables it to resist all pressures. and to face all adversities (Liu Wu-Chi, 1955, p. 11).

John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, was the most influential American thinker of his time (Encyclopedia American, vol. 9, p. 45). He helped lead the philosophical movement of pragmatism. Sometimes his philosophy is also called instrumentalism. Pragmatism declares that the usefulness, workability, and practicality of ideas, policies, and proposals are the criteria for judging their merit. Pragmatism attempts to apply the methods of science to philosophy. It holds that the meaning and truth of an idea are determined by the idea's effects in practice and on conduct. All pragmatists believe some fundamental principles: They reject the concept of anything being fixed or final - either in human nature or nature - or the substitution of pluralism for monism. They believe everything exists in a context, in which it occurs, and in relation to which it must be understood and appraised - that is, the overall principle of relativity or relatedness. They translate all meanings into terms of doing or undergoing - that is, the radical rejection of formalism. They believe the merit of every "value" should be judged by its consequences for those engaged in the human venture, and the extension of spirit and technique of science to every field where problems have to be solved (Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 19, 1983, p. 309-310). Dewey's pragmatism was keynoted by a theory of truth and meaning which stipulated that truth can be known only through its practical consequences, and is thus a social matter rather than an absolute. According to Dewey, one would learn best when actually experiencing the world rather than passively, mechanistically absorbing pre-selected content.

Although the philosophy of Confucius had dominated Chinese thought for the past twenty-five centuries and exerted an enormous influence on Chinese life, it had been increasingly discredited during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attacks of Chinese

intellectuals who had been educated in Japan and the West. Confucianism was considered the basic evil that must be discarded so that China could achieve true modernization. In 1919, perhaps the most critical years of modern Chinese history, "the more westernized elements in Peking were taking control. Confucius, and his greatest modern defender, Kang Yu-Wei, under the assault led by Ch'en Tu-Hsiu and Hu Shih, has just retired from the scene" (Y. C. Wang, 1966, p. 200). Dewey arrived in China after his pragmatism had been introduced to Chinese intellectuals by Hu Shih, Dewey's greatest Chinese disciple, and some other western trained Chinese intellectuals. Dewey's ideas were soon widely adopted by Chinese intellectuals. Dewey's philosophy played a tremendously important role in the New Culture Movement in China. For the next thirty years after Dewey's visit, his influence on Chinese education as well as other aspects of the society was so thorough as to be blamed by both the communists and the kuomintang government in 1949, after the communists controlled mainland China. Dewey was accused by conservatives of "paving the way for the communists," while simultaneously being excoriated by the communists for his opposition to their ideals and goals. Even today, although government opposition ended in 1977, many people blame Dewey's pragmatic method, as utilized by the New Culture Movement, for the disintegration of traditional Chinese culture. Although Dewey's influence is still felt to some degree in Taiwan, Chinese education has swung back to the side of Confucianism both in Taiwan and on the mainland (Clopton and Ou, 1973, p. 10-30). Dewey's philosophy has been almost totally abandoned on the mainland of China.

Pragmatism and Confucianism seem totally unharmonious from the cultural background, axiology and moral standards points of view. Unfortunately, until recently these two schools of philosophy have been treated as the two extremes of a continum of philosophy by the majority of western and eastern scholars and educators. Very few people have even tried to look for similarities within these two philosophical systems; however, a careful examination will

reveal several similarities. Since there is no known philosophy of education which is absolutely right or ideal, it is my opinion that only when advocates of western pragmatism truly understand Asian educational philosophies, and proponents of Confucianism truly understand modern experimentalism can we settle the many philosophical disputes that might otherwise be interminable.

Because the educational philosophies of John Dewey and Confucius have been long thought of in terms of "either-or" and have been exercised in the same way, it is this paper's purpose to show the similarities existing between them and to help educators to recognize the intermediate possibilities. Extensive works of Dewey and Confucius exist. The comparisons, however, have been limited to four educational concepts: democracy, learning, instruction, and scientific attitude.

Democracy

Throughout his writings, Dewey directly and by clear implication articulated his faith in the democratic way of life. He believed that "democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life" (Dewey, 1951, p. 25). At the heart of pragmatism was an abiding faith in democracy, and there was little room for authoritarian practices. Pragmatists referred to the basic ideology of the Declaration of Independence which said that "all men are created equal," and "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," including "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Pragmatists believed that if a statement of magnitude was to serve a purpose, it must have been a truthful one and designed to preserve the social status (Childs, 1956, p. 60-68). The democracy Dewey spoke for was a "partnership in superindividual activity and . . . not merely or primarily a

form of government; . . . intelligent, realistic co-operation in the attainment of significant personalities" (Collier's Encyclopedia, vol. 8, p. 171).

The spirit of democracy can also be found in Confucianism. Confucius insisted that all men of all classes possess worth in themselves and must not be treated solely as the means by which the country accomplished its purposes, but as the ends for which the country existed. He said that the purpose of government was to make the people happy. In addition, Confucius, the country should be a mutual enterprise, in the good or bad fortunes of which all its people should share. This idea can been seen in Confucius' answer to a question about raising sufficient tax revenues after a poor harvest: "when the people have plenty, with whom will you be obliged to share want? But when your people are in want, with whom can their ruler share abundance" (Analects of Confucius)?

Confucius also had a deep conviction of the relative integrity and dignity, as well as the equality and educability, of all men. This can be found in many of his dialogues with his disciples. One well-known Confucius saying is that "in education there are no class distinctions" (Analects of Confucius, chap. 5, section 38). Confucius had an open-door policy for his school; the sole admission requirement was eagerness to learn. The objectives of education, according to him, were to help each student to develop his virtue and talent to the full, and to provide society and government with qualified leaders (Encyclopedia Americana, 1983, vol. 17, p. 541).

Methods of Instruction

Methods of instruction advocated by Dewey were (1) child-centered, (2) experiential, (3) harmonious proportions of discipline and students' interest, and (4) introspective based on prior experience." Dewey believed that all genuine education comes about through experience,

and "continuity and interaction in their active union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience (Dewey, 1951, p. 43). The emphasis of instruction should be on how to help children think, rather than on what to use to make them think (Zhao, 1984. p. 87).

Dewey believed that there are two effective teaching methods which can successfully stimulate thinking: 1) presenting those old and familiar materials in a situation which deviates unexpectedly from or conflicts with one's expectation; 2) adopting certain ways of presenting new materials while not making them assimilate with the old materials. Instruction should occur according to the kind of environment the students are in. Students are expected to learn through experience and thought (Dewey, 1911, p. 175).

The teacher, for the most part, was a member of the learning group who served in the capacity of helper, guide, and arranger of experiences. The pragmatic teacher did not abdicate responsibility, but was responsible for working with the students and helping them develop their own projects (Dewey, 1913, p. 88-90). Any educative experience is legitimate subject matter as long as the experience contributes to growth. The widest variety of techniques have been justified, ranging from lassez-faire to structural. However, the most common method utilized the project-method in classrooms of free and open atmospheres (Kilpatrick, 1963, p. 304). Dewey opposed dogmatic and authoritarian teaching methods and rote learning. He believed that the democratic society must install in its citizens the habit of free inquiry and an aversion to rigid and dictatorial methods (Encyclopedia Americana, 1983, vol. 9, p. 46).

Confucius' method of instruction was personal and seemed to have been completely informal. He saw abundant potential in each student, and in each he sought to develop the total man. His methods were highly individualized for each student since each student presented a different problem. His aim was not teaching certain subjects, but certain students. Confucius

fully understood the differences among individuals. During his teaching, he encouraged students to present their questions, then answered them according to each person's need. Therefore, his answers varied from person to person. Sometimes, the same question was given different answers when different students asked it.

Confucius always carefully measured each student before he started to teach. The device which he used was quite similar to, and reminiscent of, modern psychiatry. He knew how to relax his students' tensions and anxieties. He first put his students at ease and asked them to state their ambitions freely and without reserve. On such occasions, he could be a good listener, hearing them without interruption or comment until he had understood the advantages and weaknesses of each person. Having made his analysis of the individual, he designed his instruction accordingly. Whatever field of instruction, his emphasis was not on punishment for wrong-doing but on stimulus toward right-doing, not on coercion but on persuasion. His emphasis was consistently positive instead of negative (Creal, 1949, p. 78-80).

The study of the past was strongly emphasized and encouraged by Confucius, but he stated very clearly that the only purpose for studying the past was to use it for understanding and solving present problems. Confucius established three main teaching strategies in his career. The first was the individual method of teaching. This strategy has been discussed above. The second was the heuristic method of teaching. He did not try to provide all the answers, even if he had them. Sometimes, he merely raised the questions and required the students to find the answers. He said, "if I hold up one corner of a square and the student cannot work out the other three by himself, I won't go any further (Analects of Confucius). The final strategy was gaining new insights through restudying old material. Confucius believed in the continuity of knowledge and learning; learning was a process which followed an order and advanced step by step. Therefore, his teaching proceeded from the easy to the difficult, in an orderly way, step by step.

Learning

The educational aims for the pragmatists were a reorganization of experience which added to the meaning of experience. The student was an experiencing individual capable of using intelligence to resolve problems. Learning came from this experience. Pragmatists believed that learning was not an affair of memorizing the content of a book, it was disclosed through purposeful activity. Learning from books undoubtedly acquired more vital meaning when it was associated with participation in actual life situations (Childs, 1956, p. 221). Dewey believed that learning takes place in activity and participation. Children could truly learn only if: (1) they were interested in what they were doing and (2) they were participating. One could learn best when actually experiencing the world as opposed to passively absorbing pre-selected content. Dewey believed that learning did not take place by simply memorizing, or hearing a lecture. He believed that learning can only take place in the effort of both teacher and student rather than under on the teacher's instruction. Dewey thought that learning was exploring and searching. Pragmatists believed that activity or participation was a key factor in the process of learning. Learning was the formation of habits, skills, appreciations and expectations. It was an inherent part of the process of adjustment to surroundings. Learning continued so long as the person was modified by the experience. According to Kilpatrick, "we learn what we live . . . we learn all our responses, only our responses, and all our responses; we learn each as we accept it to live by, and we learn it in the degree we accept it" (Childs, p. 194).

Dewey believed that knowledge was a means of controlling the environment, hopefully to improve the quality of human life. Therefore, the purpose of learning should not be only the gaining of knowledge itself. He advocated a concept of education as being concerned with the mind as well as the development of manual skills. Learning must be related to the interests of students and connected with current problems. Dewey believed that education must include a

student's physical and moral well-being as well as intellectual development (The World Book Encyclopedia, vol. 5, p. 143).

One main thread which can be seen throughout the educational philosophy of Confucius was learning, thinking and acting. Confucius believed that the source of knowledge was experience. Learning started from knowing nothing to knowing something, and from knowing little to knowing comparatively more. It was a process which followed an order and advanced step by step. Confucius believed that action is interrelated with knowledge. Confucius' interest was not in knowledge for its own sake, for that knowledge by itself was meaningless unless he knew how to apply his knowledge to the affairs of life. Wang Yang-Ming, a famous Confucianist of the 14th century clearly explained the point of view of Confucianism regarding the relationship between action, or practice, and knowledge. He said that "knowledge motivates action, and that practice implies the execution of knowledge. Knowing is the beginning of action, and doing is the completion of knowledge" (Wang, p. 3). The objective of Confucius' education was a practical one. He put strong emphasis on his three aspects of education. He said, "learning without thinking is empty; thinking without learning is dangerous" (Analects of Confucius) and "to study, and when the occasion arises to put what one has learned into practice -- is this not deeply satisfying" (Analects of Confucius)? He also believed that education should develop the total person and help each student to develop personal virtue and talent to the full, although the ultimate purpose was to provide society and government with qualified leaders.

Scientific Attitude

Dewey was strongly influenced by the theory of evolution. He maintained a position of unswerving loyalty to science and insisted that its use should be extended to all matters of human concern. He came to reject the view that truth is fixed and unchanging in favor of the

view that truth of an idea was determined by the idea's effects in practice and on conduct. Therefore, true ideas were those that work best for attaining human goals.

For pragmatists, knowledge is rooted in experience. True knowledge must have a recourse to concepts coming from a reason above experience. This process has been called the scientific method and involves the following steps: first, an open problem exists that has upset the equilibrium; second, the problem is refined; third, a hypothesis or tentative solution is formed; fourth, consequences of testing alternative solutions must be considered; fifth, actual field testing takes place and results are reported.

Truth should also be viewed in this scientific process. Why? First, it is an open-ended activity, open to the public and dependent upon the public test rather than a private one. Second, it is subject to error and is continuously being revised in terms of new conditions and new consequences. Third, it places the ultimate responsibility for truth and knowledge directly on the shoulders of men (Ratner, 1939, p. 760-168).

Because of the time in which Confucius lived, it is probably improper to state that he had anticipated the method of modern science, but "his thinking was characterized by an absence of dogma, a clear realization of the necessity of suspended judgement, and an espousal of intellectual democracy that, in its forthright acceptance of the minimal philosophic conditions of scientific thinking, is altogether remarkable" (Creal, p. 137). "There were four qualities from which the Master was entirely free: he had no prejudice, no wilful insistence, no obstinacy, and never saw things from his own point of view alone (Analects of Confucius). Confucius' reputation for flexibility, always acting after careful consideration of all the circumstances, was so great that he was called "the timely sage" (Creel, 1949, p. 134). Confucius' own best statement of this principle was "the true gentleman, in the world, is neither predisposed for anything nor against anything; he will side with whatever is right"

(Analects of Confucius).

Although it should not be claimed that Confucius was always as careful as strict scientific standards would demand, he did advocate a critical attitude toward information. He encouraged his disciples to see and hear much more and "suspend judgement concerning what is doubtful, and speak with due caution concerning the remainder; in this way you will seldom incur blame . . . you will have few occasions for regret" (Analects of Confucius). He said that understanding is never complete, so people should understand what is possible and suspend judgement on the rest. He even recommended that instead of guessing when a word is illegible, copiests should leave a blank in the text.

His own way of acquiring knowledge was "to hear much, select what is good and follow it; to see much and remember it" (Analects of Confucius). He insisted on intellectual honesty and alertness, saying, "when you know a thing, say that you know it; when you do not know a thing, admit that you do not know it. That is knowledge" (Analects of Confucius). He also advised his disciples that "to be mistaken, and yet not to change; this is indeed to be in error. . . If you have made a mistake, do not be afraid to admit the fact and amend your ways" (Analects of Confucius). Even today, these attitudes are still the proper attitude and necessary conditions for the ethical application of modern scientific method.

Conclusion

Confucianism and pragmatism are two schools of philosophy which have long been regarded as two extreme philosophical points of view. Confucianism, which emphasizes the necessity of self-examination, of the cultivation of virtue, and of education as the means of producing the kind of gentlemen who would be the most qualified governors of their states, has influenced not only Chinese and many other Asians, but even many western philosophers for almost two

thousand years. As one of the oldest schools of philosophy still in practice in many countries' educational systems and societies, its important role and influence on human beings have far exceeded any other school of philosophy in the world. On the other hand, pragmatism, which attempts to apply the methods of science to philosophy and lays its foundation on the principle that the meaning and truth of an idea are determined by the idea's effects in practice and on conduct, has also had tremendous impact on America's education and life.

Although both Confucianism and pragmatism have declined in acceptance by both educators and the public, they continue to appear in the theory and practice of the affairs of education as well as other aspects of human life. Unfortunately, because of the human tendency to think in terms of "either-or," at least in part, these two philosophical points of view have been considered mutually exclusive. When one point of view has been adopted by a certain system, the other has been excoriated or completely ignored. At this time, news from mainland China indicates that there are many people there who are advocating that the only way for China to catch up to the world in development and modernization is to completely abandon the traditional Chinese cultural heritage. It is sad to hear such immature thinking and it would certainly be worse to see this suggestion take place in the future. Therefore, the purpose of this paper has been to show some of the similarities between Confucianism and pragmatism in order to avoid the "either-or" arguments in thinking and to examine ideas dispassionately before deciding on a course of action. Because numerous aspects of human life have been discussed by these two philosophies, the comparison has been limited to only four aspects of education, namely democracy, instruction, learning, and scientific attitude. The reader is encouraged to make his or her own study of the two philosophies in order to better understand their similarities and the applicability to education today.

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